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Senator Goes Public With Private Life

Durenberger Says He's Passing Through Personal Transition

By Edward Walsh,
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For more than a year, Sen. David F. Durenberger (R-Minn.) has been passing through what he and his friends describe as a sometimes painful personal transition, a kind of midlife crisis. Characteristically, Durenberger's tribulations have been a little unconventional—they have proceeded in public view in his home state at the same time he has regularly made headlines here as the outspoken chairman of the Select Committee on Intelligence.

Thirteen months ago, Durenberger and his wife, Penny, separated after years of a troubled marriage. The separation was announced by Durenberger's office. At the age of 51, despite continuing success in his career as a public official, Durenberger found himself a deeply unhappy man. He moved out of the family house in McLean and into the Cedars, a nondenominational Christian retreat house in Arlington overlooking the Potomac River.

There, he said in a recent interview, he has been making "sort of a historical review of some of the events in my life and how I was unhappy in my relationship with my wife and with other people."

Durenberger's willingness to speak publicly about his private agonies—which he first did last fall to Steve Berg, a Washington reporter for The Minneapolis Star and Tribune—is one example of an unusual political personality. Another

example is his willingness to speak his mind, sometimes bluntly, as chairman of what is considered one of the most sensitive committees in Congress.

Since taking over the chairmanship of the intelligence committee in January 1985, Durenberger has publicly feuded with CIA Director William J. Casey, most recently suggesting that the nation's top intelligence agency lacked "a sense of direction" under Casey's leadership. Last fall, Durenberger won his committee's approval for the release of

a highly critical committee report on the Philippine government of then-President Ferdinand Marcos, and he followed this up at a news conference at which he called for Marcos' resignation.

Durenberger is described by the committee's senior Democrat, Sen. Patrick J. Leahy (Vt.), as "aggressive" and a "forceful character." In reorganizing the committee's staff in an attempt to make it more professional, he "ruffled some feathers along the way," said Sen. David L. Boren (D-Okla.), another committee member. Committed to an active and as public as possible intelligence oversight role for Congress, Durenberger has strong opinions and is not timid about voicing them.

He came to the chairmanship with an agenda, at the top of which was the creation of a "national intelligence strategy." Too often, he believed, the congressional oversight role has been to "shoot the wounded"—delving into intelligence operations after the fact—rather than as a mechanism to shape national intelligence goals.

Durenberger's criticism of the Central Intelligence Agency for lacking "a sense of direction" was part of this approach, which was bound to bring him into conflict with professionals in the intelligence community.

Despite Durenberger's friction with him, Casey delivered the first such national intelligence strategy to the committee this month, according to Durenberger.

Durenberger's tenure as committee chairman, which ends with the conclusion of the 99th Congress later this year, has been made all the more controversial by developments in the intelligence community. Last year was the "year of the spy," marked by the defection to the Soviet Union of KGB agent Vitaly Yurchenko and several highly publicized cases of alleged espionage by agents for Israel, China and the Soviet Union.

Combined with this was the controversy over leaks of sensitive intelligence information, which was

highlighted by the disclosure in The Washington Post last Nov. 3 of a CIA plan to help Libya's neighbors or opponents to topple the regime of Col. Muammar Qaddafi.

This prompted an unusual private meeting last fall between members of Durenberger's committee and members of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, which the House members requested.

While most intelligence leaks may come from the executive branch, a House source said, the seeming turmoil in the intelligence community "when combined with guys like Durenberger and others speaking out" alarmed some House members.

"Members were concerned that they would get swiped with the same brush," the source said.

This House attitude—and that of many of Durenberger's critics—was voiced about the same time by Rep. Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.), known in the House as "Mr. Intelligence" for his earlier service as chairman of the House committee.

Without mentioning Durenberger by name, Boland rose on the House floor Nov. 19, a few days after an acrimonious public exchange in which Casey, responding to Durenberger's criticism of the CIA, accused the Senate committee of conducting its oversight function in an "off-the-cuff" manner that resulted in the "repeated compromise of sensitive intelligence sources and methods."

As chairman of the House committee, Boland said, "I did not find it necessary to proclaim publicly every disagreement with the intelligence agencies . . . I do not believe that it is helpful or appropriate for members of Congress who sit on oversight committees to regularly or recklessly comment on intelligence matters, either critically or favorably."